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ABSTRACT

This booklet presents a guide to the development of a dissemination model for educational accountability programs. Emphasis is placed on: (1) the importance of carefully defining the term educational accountability, (2) the need for understanding the processes of communication and dissemination, (3) the basic steps in developing an effective program for disseminating information, (4) the effect of the message on specific audiences, (5) suggested techniques for effectively working with the news media. (MLP)

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"Telling an individual or an organization to 'be accountable' is not sufficient. If no mechanism exists for reporting back to the various publics that originally demanded accountability, the frustrations responsible for producing the demand for accountability will remain unsatisfied."

Erwin P. Bettinghaus

Gerald R. Miller

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KEEPING THE PUBLIC INFORMED:

ACCENT ON ACCOUNTABILITY

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The aim of accountability is to improve the quality of education.

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PREFACE

One of the major problems in attempting to introduce complex social changes is the problem of dissemination. Getting all of the relevant publics acquainted with a proposed change and agreed to the change is frequently more difficult than working out the technical details of the change itself.

When the Michigan Department of Education and the Cooperative Accountability Project approached us with a proposal to develop a dissemination model for educational accountability, we were fascinated with the complexity of the problem and the real need for such a model. As work began, we soon found that the problem was far more complex than a first glance might suggest. The result of our efforts was a hefty, three-part report. Although we feel that these papers are useful, their length alone is sufficient to deter all but the most dedicated readers.

Therefore, we were pleased when the Cooperative Accountability Project staff suggested the preparation of this short monograph which would pull out many of the most essential materials and arrange them in an attractive format. This monograph does preserve the suggestions we think are most important to the development of an adequate dissemination model. It also eliminates much of the verbiage present in the larger work.

This monograph is readable, and we think it will be useful. It should make you, the reader, aware of the problems of dissemination and may send some of you to the larger report for further information. Of course this booklet is intended only as a general communication guide. Each state, indeed, each school district, will need to interpret and activate the recommendations in terms of local circumstances. Hopefully, it will entice all of you to begin consideration of dissemination activities in your own state or district.

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WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
A DEFINITION:

Before launching a communication program, it is essential to define carefully the term *educational accountability* for participants in the program and for various segments of the general public.

Although they are not synonymous, *accountability* and *assessment* have become firmly linked in the mind of most of the general public and many of the groups closely associated with education (such as legislators, school boards, teachers, etc.). In turn, assessment has been linked to *financial accountability*. *Testing* and *test scores* also have been equated with accountability.

None of these terms—alone—gives the full meaning of accountability. Definition is a primary communication problem.

The Cooperative Accountability Project (CAP) defines educational accountability in this way:

> Educational accountability serves to explain the results that are being achieved by public elementary and secondary schools. It provides a basis for developing understanding of the relationship between quality in education and available resources in order to make educational improvements.

In other words, accountability programs are trying to determine and report answers to these questions:

- What is happening in the schools?
- How much does it cost?
- Is it effective?

WHO CARES?

Educational accountability was demanded by the public as a result of dissatisfaction with their understanding of the way in which public education was being conducted. Evidence of unequal educational opportunities and sharp increases in taxes during the 1960s also aroused concern. Basically, citizens were saying, "Communicate with us. Tell us what you are doing and why it costs what it does."

The public put pressures on state legislatures—pressures which were felt by state education agencies as well as by local school officials. The reaction was establishment of accountability programs through various forms of legislation.

However, in developing these various forms of accountability, local and state officials generally have not come to grips with the question of how to report back to that public whose requests were largely responsible for the initial decision to establish the accountability programs.

It is incorrect to assume that everyone is concerned about educational accountability. Actually it may interest only a small percentage of the population. But it is still vital to communicate effectively to those individuals and groups that do care about accountability. They may include:

- parents
- students
- taxpayers
- news media
- teachers
- principals
- superintendents
- educational specialists
- psychologists
- testing experts
- education associations
- state legislators
- state boards of education
- local boards of education
- state citizens' groups
- local citizens' groups

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE?

In almost every instance, the nature of state legislation for accountability programs places the responsibility for developing and implementing such programs with the state departments of education. Likewise, the primary responsibility for communication about these programs lies with each state educational agency.

Ideally, a trained information coordinator will be assigned to the task of planning and executing a well-rounded communication program. This coordinator should be involved in the planning of the accountability program itself so that communication activities do not become merely an "overlaid" function, an afterthought.

With or without a trained information coordinator at the state level, many other individuals in school districts throughout each state must participate in the communication process. A widespread understanding of that process is fundamental to its success.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

In its simplest form, communication is a process by which a *source* develops and transmits a *message* through some *channel* to one or a group of *receivers*.

Sources may be either individuals or institutions (including state departments of education, state legislatures, state or local school boards, etc.).

Messages are the physical written or spoken symbols of ideas and concepts (in the form of reports, newspaper stories, radio or television coverage, lectures, etc.).

Channels are those ways through which messages are transmitted to a receiver (such as the newspaper, radio and television station, individuals who serve as transmitters, group situations, etc.).

Receivers are those individuals or groups of individuals who are exposed to and pay attention to a message (intentionally or unintentionally).

THREE BASIC THEORIES ABOUT COMMUNICATION

1. **We communicate to influence the behavior of others.**
   A common mistaken assumption is that the purpose of communication is to construct messages. Actually, message construction is a means toward the end of influencing response, not an end in itself.

   The ways in which messages are constructed will influence the behavioral response to the message. Because there are many different receivers for your messages, a variety of messages must be tailored for a particular receiver or group of receivers.

2. **Meanings are in people, not in words.**
   Printed, written, and spoken words have intended meanings (such as those found in the dictionary), but each receiver actually supplies individual interpretations for words. Obviously, meanings will vary widely from one person to another.

   If your communication efforts are guided by this theory, you will try to predict the meanings your receivers will have for your words. You will choose words that are most likely to bring forth meanings which support the behavioral responses you want.

3. **Reality is subjective; we create our own reality.**
   Another common mistaken assumption is that what exists for us is interpreted in precisely the same way by everyone else. Actually, receivers tend to distort, ignore, or avoid incoming messages that do not conform with their point of view.

   Therefore empathy is an essential ingredient of effective communication. You need to try to see the world through the intellectual and emotional windows of other people—the receivers of your messages.

Other observations about the communication process

- *Receiver involvement* in all stages of development, implementation, and communication for accountability programs is extremely important. It fosters understanding of, and commitment to, accountability.

- Receiver involvement also encourages some individuals to persuade themselves of the value of a program such as accountability, rather than being persuaded by someone else.

- When people publicly declare allegiance to a particular program—when they publicly commit themselves—it has the effect of "freezing" attitudes and making the individual less susceptible to arguments of other people.

- Identification of *opinion leaders* (people whose opinions count) within various groups of receivers is essential. Opinion leaders are more likely to accept innovations such as accountability programs if they have been actively involved in the development of those programs. Subsequently, they can help to influence other people to accept and understand accountability. Care is required in identifying opinion leaders, however. The most vocal and visible person may not always represent the true opinion of the group he or she claims to represent. The most influential opinion leaders may remain unobtrusively in the background; they must be sought out.

- Almost invariably, information precedes persuasion.

- Communication is an *interactive process*. Any message will bring about different responses from its receivers. Those responses may be in the form of other messages which will, in turn, have an effect on other receivers.

- People prefer consistency in their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. If something disrupts comfortable consistency (such as the introduction of new concepts of educational accountability), people often try to restore consistency. They may do this by discrediting the source of the intruding change... by distorting the message...or by seeking more information which seems to counteract disturbing messages.

- Research indicates the rate of adoption of an innovation (such as accountability) consistently takes the form of an S-shaped curve representing early and late acceptance of the innovation.

- Little is gained by merely motivating a person (receiver) to behave; rather, for communication to be successful, the individual must behave in a particular way, namely, by supporting the concept and methods of accountability.

- The source of communication makes a difference in the degree to which people (receivers) accept what is communicated. This is the *credibility* factor.

- Important elements which seem to improve credibility include *competence* and *trustworthiness*. A successful communication program must give considerable initial effort to building credibility. This lays the groundwork for favorable reaction to the sources of information and recommendations concerning accountability. Again, feedback should include reactions to the vital credibility factor.

the basic steps

To accomplish an effective accountability communication program, it is important to include these four basic steps:

1. Determine the objectives;
2. Identify and analyze the receivers (audience);
3. Select appropriate techniques for reaching each audience;
4. Evaluate the effect of your messages on specific audiences.

1. Determine Objectives

The basic goal of any communication program is to produce messages which will fulfill specific objectives. For some audiences, more than one objective will need to be defined. For example, in working with a group of school principals within a state, appropriate objectives might be to have them comply with the tasks required under the program and also have them be willing to verbally support accountability when working with their own staff members. If the target audience is a group of taxpayers, it may be appropriate simply to set a goal of increasing awareness about accountability. When you set out to determine your communication objectives, consider these basic goals:

a) **Increase awareness** of the accountability program.

Obviously it is necessary to make any receiver aware of the topic before other effects can be expected. You may determine to make most citizens of your state or area aware of accountability. Or you may set a more limited objective such as making every public school teacher and parents of school-age children aware of the program. To increase awareness, you can utilize:

- Major news media—press, radio, television;
- Local news media—press, radio, television;
- Special publications—chamber of commerce newspapers, company newsletters, church leaflets, club and civic organization bulletins, alumni magazines, student newspapers, professional journals;
- The schools themselves—via leaflets sent home with pupils, teachers' meetings, parent-teacher consultations;
- Face-to-face contact (remember many potential receivers are not exposed to the mass media);
- Multi-media presentations which can be adapted for various groups and objectives.

b) **Change attitudes** toward the accountability program.

It is doubtful that every possible receiver will have a favorable attitude toward the program. Ask yourself, "Which receivers or audiences are most important to the success of the program? How can their attitudes be made favorable toward accountability?" Then determine if these receivers:

- have sufficient information about the program;

- see the need for the program and find it meaningful;
- recognize the importance of the program in their own personal lives;
- have received balanced information about the reactions of other groups—including positive reactions to offset any critical ones.

c) **Achieve acceptance** of the program tasks.

Acceptance governs many of our daily activities. Even if individuals do not necessarily agree with the accountability program, they usually will accept its requirements if they:

- understand that a law or policy has been put in operation;
- know their superiors support the program;
- know almost everyone is on the "bandwagon."

Of course mere acceptance without agreement and support is not the best of all possible outcomes from the communication process. But for certain groups of receivers, acceptance of the task at hand may be the only state of affairs that can be achieved.

d) **Obtain support** for the program.

Try to achieve not merely acceptance but support for the accountability program via receivers' communication with other people. Here opinion leaders become vital. Keep in mind these points in identifying and utilizing opinion leaders:

- they are likely to be opinion leaders on more than one topic. If they talk about other educational subjects, they are likely to talk about accountability;
- they are likely to be associated with a specific group of related associates. Thus the elected teachers' association representative may become an opinion leader among other teachers...or certain superintendents enjoying widespread stature and respect may become accountability leaders among their associates;
- they receive information ahead of the group they lead, and they have more information about the topic. This suggests the importance of special briefings or training sessions aimed at identified opinion leaders;
- they should not be seen as "tools" of the state department of education. In the interest of the opinion leaders' credibility, care must be taken in any training or communication attempts to prevent their being visibly tied to the imagined aims of the state level personnel;
- they tend to form opinions on both sides of any question. Thus there are both positive and negative opinion leaders. While some negative opinion leaders can be convinced to change their attitudes, others will continue to disagree with accountability concepts. A successful communication program will recognize disagreement and counter it by explaining the positive point of view.

2. **Analyze the Receivers** (Audiences)

As noted before, some individuals are more important to the success of the accountability program than others. Therefore, more of the communication effort should be directed to *key publics* rather than to receivers who bear only minor relationship to the program. Compile a list of key publics which probably will include:

a) **Parents.** Parents have a large stake in accountability. They are perhaps the one audience which can provide the greatest support for the local educational program *if* they are kept fully informed. When the schools' communicative process with parents breaks down, local educators will spend more time pacifying parents than would have been required for a satisfactory communication effort.

b) **State Level Citizens' Groups.** These would include the state Chamber of Commerce, parent-teacher organizations, Urban League, League of Women Voters, labor unions, educational associations, trade associations, etc. Concentrate on those special organizations which have credibility with large groups of individuals and whose mission includes some educational issues. Reach these groups via:
   - The executive director, if there is one, the elected president, and the board of trustees;
   - The program chairman. Organizations which hold regular or periodic meetings usually are seeking good speakers on timely topics;
   - The publicity chairman or editor. State organizations generally publish a newsletter, magazine, or report to their membership. Information received in such publications often is more readily accepted by receivers than information issued by the general news media.

c) **Local Level Citizens' Groups.** Success or failure of an accountability communication program depends to a very large extent on the success it has at the local level. Two major groups of potential receivers can be singled out on the local level. They are:
   - Individuals who have formal connections with the school system (such as local school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, other school personnel, teacher assistants, parent-teacher organizations, athletic booster groups, etc.);
   - Individuals locally influential but not directly associated with the schools (such as service and professional groups, the local Chamber of Commerce, local chapters of the League of Women Voters, etc.).

d) **The Higher Education Public.** This group includes university and college deans, professors of education,

educational consultants, etc. These people generally are more interested in and more knowledgeable about accountability right from the start. And they have contact and influence with large numbers of key publics, both individually and in groups. Approach the higher education public in these ways:

- Consult with appropriate individuals from the higher education sector when the accountability program is first planned;
- Through journals, professional meetings, reports, other media, and verbal communication, tell other members of this sector—and the general public as well—that consultation has been received from the higher education community;
- Try to retain some of the higher education consultants on the communication team. They will feel more committed to a program they helped develop...will have a high level of information about the program...and generally will have high credibility.

e) **The News Media.** This refers to all formal press and electronic outlets—both on state and local levels. Included are daily and weekly newspapers, special publications, radio and television stations. The attitudes of news media representatives can influence the quantity and position of reporting and editorial comment. The media actually are both a key public and a channel for your messages.
(See TIPS FOR WORKING WITH NEWS MEDIA on page 13.)

Of special importance in reaching your identified receivers or audiences is *personal contact*. It is obvious, however, that a state level communication coordinator or other state department of education personnel cannot deliver all the needed messages to potential receivers. This limitation means that capable and dedicated people must be *designated and trained* to assist on the accountability communication team.

Periodic briefings or training sessions (one-time-only meetings are not enough) make it possible to relate information to individuals who then will serve as local transmitters of the information. Prepared speeches delivered again and again are not recommended, but lecture and discussion outlines can be very helpful. Supportive visual materials and handouts also should be provided.

3. **Select Appropriate Techniques for Reaching Each Audience.**

Potential receivers of your accountability message may not have consciously arrived at any meanings for the words you use, or their meanings may differ from your intended meanings. Thus your communication program must work to develop *shared meanings* and then to influence behavior. Here are some techniques to consider:

a) **Clarify Definition.** Do not rely on a few scattered attempts to develop a clear understanding of the definition of accountability. Carefully plan an extended effort to create and heighten shared meanings about your accountability program. This effort should begin before the program actually is implemented, and it should continue throughout the communication campaign so that meanings will be sharpened and refined continually. To create persuasive messages in an effort to clarify definition, consider use of the following methods:

- Acknowledge that meanings exist for educational accountability other than the meanings you wish to establish, explain the inadequacy or inappropriateness of these other meanings, and then point out the greater utility of the correct definition;
- Place the most important points at the beginning and the end of your messages. Research consistently reveals a "U"-shaped pattern of information retention; receivers most frequently remember material presented early or late in the message;
- Draw conclusions concerning definition explicitly. Sometimes we tend to leave what appears to be obvious left unsaid, to allow receivers to draw their own conclusions. This subtlety can create problems in understanding your message;
- Generally aim for a moderate amount of emotional arousal on the part of the receivers of your definition message. A great deal of study has been directed to the effects of emotional arousal. Conclusions indicate that either extremely low or extremely high arousal results in minimal persuasive impact. Remember too that optimal emotional arousal is likely to vary considerably from one group of receivers to another.

b) **Involvement.** To obtain public acceptance of an accountability program, probably no single factor is more important than receiver invovlement. Interaction allows people to air and discuss reservations they have about the program; "blowing off steam" may suffice to overcome resistance. Involvement heightens the level of commitment. And involvement creates a climate for social support; how others feel and act has a strong influence on our own behavior.

Not to be overlooked is the fact that involvement also helps to get the job done. There are many, many tasks

associated with an educational accountability program. From devising the program itself to passing out leaflets or leading a discussion group, you need participation by a large number of individuals.

c) **Utilize Social Action.** Obviously you do not introduce educational accountability in a vacuum. You must be thoroughly familiar with the existing social system into which you bring accountability. Understanding that system is a primary prerequisite for successful social change. To violate drastically a community's shared values and objectives is to virtually ensure the failure of an accountability program.

Relate the new accountability program to the existing social situation. If you do not do this, the innovation may be seen as an isolated event which has little bearing on the actual social situation. Pinpoint the problem situations, involving key publics in the process. Then plan social action, considering these steps:

- Build links in an action and communication network. Too frequently programs fail because of unwillingness or delay on the part of the program creators to involve others in the work of the program;
- Get commitments for action. Programs often seem to lose momentum following the definition of need. People agree that problems exist and that something should be done to remedy them, but the required action steps are never taken. To avoid this, get commitments for action—public commitments—from people whose participation is essential to the success of the program;
- Get going. Mobilize your resources. Launch the communication program. Take action steps;
- Extend the action and communication network. Having defined the problem and initiated action to deal with it, take your program and your message to a larger audience. In the process, alleviate fears of change...illustrate the educational problems that need to be eliminated...and explain to the larger community the ways in which change through accountability will be beneficial;
- Evaluate what is happening continually and objectively. Don't allow yourself to see only the favorable developments and overlook the unfavorable ones which need attention;
- Be open to an alternate course of action. At any point in social action, there exists the possibility that alternate courses of action may prove superior to the ones you started with. After all, change is not sought for change's sake. The development of educational accountability programs is based on the assumption that they can eliminate or alleviate certain problems with the educational system. If you're barking up the wrong tree, change course.

4. **Evaluate the Effect of Your Communication Program.**

Your communication objectives have been defined. The key publics have been identified and analyzed. The techniques of a communication program have been selected and applied.

Feedback information gathered along the way has provided some evaluative evidence of the effectiveness of the communication process. Now is the time for a summary evaluation of the broad communication program. Gather information with which to judge the impact of what you already have done and to help you plan what you are going to do next. Consider these questions:

a) Was the communication program adequately planned?
b) Were communication objectives clearly determined?
c) Did you succeed in building correct shared meanings for the term educational accountability?
d) Were the factors of receiver involvement...personal contact...and opinion leaders effectively utilized?
e) Did you reach all identified key publics? Which messages were most effective? Least effective? Where are the major information gaps?
f) Did you get the news media coverage you wanted and needed? If not, why not?
g) Could you have made better provisions for unforeseen circumstances?
h) How could you have made your communication program more effective?

Evaluation of your communication program cannot be limited to your own measurements of its results or to the opinions of people closely involved in the communication process. It is vital to find out from the key publics themselves how much you have accomplished. Nor is mere measurement of news clippings or electronic media coverage adequate; this does little more than indicate media acceptance of your output. For well-rounded evaluation of the communication process, consider these techniques:

a) If at all possible, a systematic study should be conducted to determine how people feel and how much they know about educational accountability. Such a public opinion survey should be conducted objectively, preferably by an outside organization skilled in opinion survey methods;
b) If a formal study is not possible, carefully and objectively develop your own questionnaires aimed at your various key publics;
c) Use person-to-person inquiry. Continue to seek feedback. Ask people with whom you have hoped to communicate how much of your message reached them and what it meant to them;
d) Analyze the responses you get in relation to your stated objectives for the accountability program as well as for your communication program.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

1. Provide well-delineated information to the state's major newspapers, radio and television stations, using a broad point of view.

2. Don't overlook the importance of the smaller press and electronic outlets, but be sure to give them a localized angle to your story.

3. Accuracy is absolutely essential in all information given to the news media. Double check names (including spellings), dates, places, statistics, and other data before submitting material to the media. Establish a reputation as a reliable source of information.

4. Be concise in stating your message, but still give enough details to explain your points and to create a story that makes sense. Use the traditional who, what, when, where, and why elements. Credit sources of opinions and factual statements, using direct quotations where appropriate.

5. Follow all standard procedures for the physical preparation of news releases, such as typing, double-spaced, on one side of the page only, etc. Whenever possible, give information in written form rather than verbally. Proofread every press release carefully; find even the smallest errors and correct them very neatly. Never send carbon copies to the media, but always keep a carbon of each release on file in case verification of facts is later necessary.

6. If you lack the personnel or skills to write a press release in story form, prepare a well-organized fact sheet giving all details in logical order.

7. Remember news reporters usually are not trained educators. Keep your information understandable. If terminology or statistics are confusing, your story may be ignored or written inaccurately. Expect to have your releases cut and/or rewritten by media staff members.

8. Analyze the media staffing patterns and direct your information to the person most likely to handle your story. Be prepared for inquiries initiated by education editors or reporters with larger media outlets; they will not necessarily wait to hear from you.

9. Avoid using "pull" with the media executives, but if you really do need help in determining which department or staff member is best able to handle your story, consult the managing editors or station managers. Always be fully cooperative in following through with staff members.

10. Do a thorough job of providing information so that your story does not cost the media much in terms of time, energy, or money.

11. Editors aim to maintain their objectivity. Never try to pressure them by telling them they "must" cover a particular story. Make your information vital enough so that the importance of the story is obvious.

12. Treat the news media equally. Strong resentment can result when one newspaper, for example, is deliberately given an "exclusive." Other media may ignore subsequent stories, and even the favored outlet may lose respect for the source of the information. On the other hand, the reporter who asks for an exclusive feature story on a special angle he has researched himself is entitled to it, and his request should be respected.

13. Whenever possible, news releases should be designed specifically for a particular newspaper, radio or television station, keeping in mind their individual format and style of coverage.

14. News releases should be fairly frequent and must contain some updating information about the progress of the accountability program.

15. Prepare material for the electronic media in a different manner than for the printed media. Generally releases for radio and television must be much shorter than for newspapers. Tapes or interviews may be wanted by some outlets. Visuals often are required by television channels, and they quite frequently will do the actual production of their visuals if you provide adequate suggestions to catch their interest.

16. The editorial policy of a newspaper, radio or television station seldom can be changed. Attempts to "direct" editorial policy are doomed to failure. Provide complete and accurate information; don't try to dictate a point of view.

17. In most cases it is wisest to simply not react to an unpleasant editorial or critical story—except where there has been use of misinformation which can be corrected. Also remember the "Letters to the Editor" columns, but don't use them as a place in which to be vindictive.

18. Always provide the name and telephone number of a knowledgeable person who may be contacted by the media if they have questions about your story or want additional information. Any agency handling an educational accountability communication program should have an individual who is empowered to deal directly and authoritatively with the media. This power should not be dissipated among a number of spokesmen but should be concentrated in one person who can comment appropriately on the facts of any situation regarding the accountability effort.

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